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AUTHOR Gilliland, Mary
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ABSTRACT

As a result of increasing communication between the student staff of the Walk-In Service and new instructors enrolled in the course entitled Teaching Writing, Cornell University (New York) has instituted the Essay Response Consultation program. Freshman Writing Seminar instructors get free, private consultation about responding to student essays. Instructors interested in receiving more formal and focused consultation receive it from an experienced tutor who reads a set of papers in which the instructor has already commented. Although a relatively new program, a collection of observations have surfaced often enough to be noteworthy: instructors and tutors share many of the same concerns about student writing. In at least two cases, the initial discussion of the effectiveness of comments on the particular set of papers turned into a general discussion of teaching. Tutors have offered observations about balance in essay response--balance between comments about content and structure, between attention to argument and style, between praise and critique. Tutors who have participated have gained a greater appreciation of how hard grading really is, and that the validation of quality work with student writers works both ways. Program participants have come to value collaborative learning among instructional staff. Writing instructors come closer to the goals of having clearer conversations with their students on paper and becoming more approachable in individual conferences. (RS)

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Responding to Student Papers: Instructors Consult with Tutors

Mary Gilliland
Senior Lecturer and Director, The Walk-In Service
John S. Knight Writing Program, Cornell University

As a result of increasing communication between the student staff of the Walk-In Service and new instructors enrolled in the course Teaching Writing, Cornell University has instituted the Essay Response Consultation program. Instructors have asked how to avoid the sense of doing battle with students when grading papers, how--given a multitude of writing problems--to prioritize substantive topics in their comments, how to help students elicit their own solutions to revision problems rather than giving them teacher-dependent answers. In the course of their work, tutors have wondered how to demystify the language of paper commentary for students, and how to better encourage students to approach their instructors with questions about writing.

This presentation describes the results of a program designed to give teachers of Freshman Writing Seminars free, private consultation about responding to student essays. Writing Seminar instructors are encouraged to consult with undergraduate and graduate student tutors during Walk-In Service hours. Experienced tutors have seen what kinds of responses from instructors are most helpful, and which are less helpful; they have seen types of writing assignments that can create difficulty, as well as those that provide useful guidance. Those instructors interested in receiving more formal and focused consultation are invited to participate in the collaborative program of Essay Response Consultation. A tutor reads a set of papers on which an instructor has commented, then the two meet for a

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one-to one consultation to discuss questions and insights regarding response to student work.

Let me give you an overview of the larger institutional context that frames this collaboration between instructors and tutors. The John S. Knight Writing Program is one of the country's oldest and largest writing across the curriculum programs. Each semester, over 100 different Freshman Writing Seminars are taught in more than 30 departments and programs located in the humanities, social sciences, expressive arts, and sciences. Classes are small, with a maximum enrollment of seventeen. The program-wide set of guidelines asks for at least 30 pages of writing per student consisting of six to twelve assignments including two substantive revisions, ample classroom time spent on work directly related to writing, reading asignments not to exceed 75 pages per week, and individual conferences. One-third of the seminars are taught by faculty, professorial or lecturer, located in the sponsoring departments; two-thirds are taught by graduate student teaching assistants, also located in the sponsoring departments.

There are approximately 85 Teaching Assistants new to the Freshman Writing Seminar Program each year, and all are required to take Teaching Writing, a 700-level 6-week course offered in both the summer and the fall. Participants attend lectures and discussion groups, do readings in composition theory and pedagogy, and practice designing assignments for their prospective courses. The summer term includes an apprenticeship program for about 30 new TAs; graduate students act as interns with faculty mentors who are teaching Freshman Writing Seminars. During the academic year, faculty members act as course leaders for graduate students who are teaching, holding regular staff meetings,

visiting classes, reviewing paper comments, and providing other mentoring support. In addition, TAs may collaborate with other more experienced Teaching Assistants; projects in the peer-collaboration program might include visiting each other's classes, team-teaching, acting as guest instructor, or entering into a formal mentoring relationship of working closely with another graduate student who has taught at least two seminars and has previously done collaborative projects.

So you can see the degree of collegiality and fertile possibility operative within this decentralized structure of training writing instructors. What of the tutors? The Walk-In Service is a paid appointment rather than an academic course that gives extensive training in tutoring methods. Hiring is based on ability. The twelve students who comprise the staff are selected by virtue of their proven excellence in both writing and interactive communication skills. I consider myself fortunate in the quality of the applicant pool; many are referred by writing instructors or are self-referrals who have worked at other college writing centers before enrolling at Cornell.

Orientation materials for new tutors include readings about tutoring theory and practice, but the focus of training is experiential rather than theoretical. Although the tutors may not be consciously aware of it, much of the training is peer training; it takes place at biweekly staff meetings in the form of rigorous and lively interchange. In addition to writing reports of each tutoring session and attending staff meetings, tutors are asked to peruse records of sessions other than their own, to write midterm self-evaluations, to visit other tutors and write peer reviews of their work, and from time to time to give public talks about the process of writing. Our approach to clients is one that most writing centers use: Socratic rather

than didactic. To the extent possible, WalkIn Service tutors act as listeners, partners, collaborators, readers, rather than prescribers, instructors, evaluators. The person who comes for help is encouraged to be as active as possible in order that revision be substantive rather than superficial. Since it is a drop-in service and is like the rest of the Writing Program decentralized, having three separate on-campus locations, we encourage multiple sessions per paper, so that tutor and writer can work on one or two central writing problems or strengths per session.

During my six years as Director of the WalkIn Service, an extensive library of reference materials for specialized writing topics has developed, materials more frequently drawn on or studied by the tutors rather than presented to those with whom they work. Many of these--on topics such as the distinction between summary and analysis (would that were only a freshman problem!), moving from a chronological to a thematic outline, annotating and notetaking in order to read critically, the special requirements for writing effective personal essays--have been developed by tutors themselves, either individually or collaboratively.

Now you know a little about our bases, our biases, and snippets of our history. One origin of the Essay Response Consultation program is the difference in students' relations with instructors and with tutors. Students don't ask the same questions of professors--and they categorize TAs as professors--that they do of tutors, because tutoring is more of peer relation. Tutors, for example, frequently hears of student fears, and sometimes see their tears. For many of the same reasons that tutors have developed reference materials for each other and for subsequent tutoring staff, they also reached a point of wanting to formalize the fund of knowledge about freshman writers for the benefit of the always-changing

instructional staff of the Freshman Writing Seminar program. In the Fall of 1993 the WalkIn Service staff sent a memo to these instructors about aspects of their students that they might not usually see: those muted by hierarchy, those whose writing problems might be solved by making an appointment to talk with their instructor, concerns about unfair grades, nightmares about class, low self-confidence, misunderstandings of commentary on papers that originate in differences of vocabulary and formalities of discourse. Response was positive. The memo is now part of the reading material distributed to those enrolled in Teaching Writing, and during one of the final training sessions tutors visit the class for a brief talk and question session.

The Essay Response Consultation program was created in order to make more of a difference to more individuals. When they consult with an undergrad tutor, instructors are exposed to the perspective of an intelligent student who, two to three years previously was enrolled in a seminar like the one the instructor is teaching. In the case of a grad student, instructors work with a student who has previously taught such a writing course, and may indeed be teaching another one at the time of the consultation. The program began with a pilot in the Fall of '95 and got underway in the Spring of '96. Since this is an invitational program, expressed interest generally exceeds follow-through, but we tend to work with four to eight instructors per semester. Recently, the program has been added to the options for fulfilling the assignments in Teaching Writing, so we are expecting some expansion. Participant response has been enthusiastic. During the past year I've asked for a brief report of the consultation, and I'd like to share with you some of those responses--other than tutors' observations about the potential confusion created by several

instructors' cryptic handwriting, leading to suggestions for better mastery of that skill or else for recourse to the keyboard!

This is a relatively new program and so I have not yet a compendious assortment of statistics. What I do have is a collection of observations that have surfaced often enough to be noteworthy. Frequently mentioned is the value of finding that instructor and tutor shared many of the same concerns about student writing. Instructors have appreciate validation of the clarity and effectiveness with which they are responding to student writing. Discussion helps to clarify instructors' deliberations about whether particular problems are writing or conceptual, and to direct or redirect their attention to the ideas that a paper is trying to express regardless of inadequate or even nightmare prose. Instructors have appreciated tutors' suggestions about tone, and these have ranged from encouraging the instructor to continue being encouraging to making sure comments are a little more forcefully stated.

In at least two cases, the initial discussion of the effectiveness of comments on the particular set of papers turned into a general discussion of teaching. One new instructor was able to discuss her fears, questions about syllabus, lack of preparation, with a tutor who had already taught several seminars. Another consultation centered on teaching aims, and resulted in the instructor's planning to reverse her course design the following semester. Her comments during the first half of the semester had focused on the sentence level and transitions between paragraphs. Next time the course was taught, she planned to postpone this focus until later in the semester, saying, "I really needed this input because I hadn't realized the extent to which I was concentrating on structural issues at the

expense...of getting [students] to look a little closer [to explore ideas more deeply]."

Tutors have offered observations about balance in essay response: balance between comments about content and structure, between attention to argument and to style, between praise and critique. They have sometimes reviewed with instructors techniques for emphasizing higher order concerns: "For example, he had devoted the first 2 paragraphs of comments to a discussion of commas--which was a very lively discussion--and mentioned in two sentences at the end that the thesis and argument development needed to be stronger. I suggested that he reverse the order and space devoted to the two comments." They have also mentioned helping instructors with a particularly weak paper from the class, prioritizing points on which to comment and also raising the possibility that for lack of time or ability the student hadn't done the reading upon which the paper was based. In one case of an instructor's disappointment over the generally poorer quality of papers written in response to a particular assignment, tutor and instructor examined the assignment itself.

Quantity versus quality is, as you might expect, a fruitful topic. An instructor who seemed to see the general problems and strengths in students papers was advised to address them with more specificity: "There are a lot of 'good's' in his margins and vague gestures toward trouble spots in his concluding remarks; I suggested that he work more with good students, either by finding ways they could improve or explaining (putting a name to) what they do well." Another instructor was advised about ways to make her comments briefer but more informational. This instructor found especially helpful the recommendation that she ask students more questions at junctures where ideas don't flow logically or

smoothly: "So that instead of merely pointing out that there is a rough transition (or no transition at all) between two sentences (ideas) or between two paragraphs, I could point this out, but also help the student by asking a question that would enable the student to think about the relationship between these sentences/ideas or paragraphs. I think that this is a more productive pedagogical strategy than merely just pointing out the moments of incoherence in the paper, which was what I was doing; or to provide the transition answers myself to these moments, something that I had thought about doing."

I've summarized how the consultation has affected instructors and do not have time to speak much about the effects on tutors, except to point out that those who have participated have gained a much greater appreciation of how hard grading really is, and to say that the validation of quality work with student writers works both ways. In the words of a junior who has been tutoring for two years: "We had mostly the same concerns about student prose....It was kind of like talking to myself, except that I had a basement office...and a goofy beard. But it has affected my tutoring--talking to this guy basically affirmed...that I kind of knew what I was talking about when I talked about writing. And a confident tutor is a more effective and happy tutor."

One result that does bear close examination is the frequency of instructors' appreciation of tutors' discussing how to respond to the best papers, for all of us in the profession--tutors as well as instructors--are susceptible to the cliched responses of a sigh of relief that in this case we haven't a great deal of work to do, and a pat on the back to the writer. How, then, do we respond in an original and articulate way to the best writers we work with; how, in the words of one instructor, "encourage

students to go further, even with an essay that's already at the A level"? Drawing on some of these individualized experiences with instructors, and wishing to create a pool of knowledge to draw from when the next occasion of the best writer seeking help arose, the tutoring staff explored this question collaboratively. Their suggestions might sound like stalling for time, but I think they're really stalling for thought; excellence requires a different order of thinking and response than average. Possibilities include pointing out the best sections and techniques of an essay in order to throw into relief substantive or organizational concerns that are weaker; looking for unused or misused energy, such as an overwritten section where the energy of language might have been applied too elegantly to be solid; asking the largest questions, those of rethinking, of outlining the draft, of really changing what is being said; buffering comments less, being more the full self in response, respecting the argument enough to talk about it directly; asking what the writer thinks the weaknesses are, in order possibly to disagree or differentiate or add to or see what the writer didn't; working as an equal by letting the writer ask the questions--all suggestions that instructors can use, even the last, by asking students to write their questions in the classroom before essays are collected.

Challenging good writers to write consistently up to their best reminds me of a challenge that a grad student tutor raised in a consultation report: the issue of self-selection in a program such as this, that the minority of instructors we would most want to reach--those who neglect their teaching or whose commentary on papers leaves students in the dark--are the very ones who would not volunteer for a program such as Essay Response Consultation. Doesn't such a program by its very nature attract the best teachers or those committed to improving their teaching?

Wouldn't we, he asked, rather find ways to help those who don't teach well, or who don't want to? We must be careful in addressing such an important question: a required or coerced consultation might increase defensiveness among those who might be unsure of their teaching and possibly even creative punitive connotations. I suspect a more effective way to reach such instructors would be by attraction, by building the momentum and enlarging the pool of shared insights that collaborations such as ours between caring tutors and interested instructors can provide.

I value reflective teaching, and what I see as the primary benefit to all involved in the Essay Response Consultation program is an increased sense of naturalness and confidence in simply being oneself on the job. For I think that Nancy Sommers' insight that "[w]ritten comments need to be an extension of the teacher's voice ("Responding to Student Writing," CCCC 1982, 155) is an important reminder of the benefits of the conversational element of our work. Participants in this program have come to value collaborative learning among instructional staff. Writing instructors come closer to the goals of having clearer conversations with their students on paper and becoming more approachable in individual conferences. After an analytic conversation with a tutor who has a wide-ranging and diverse experience of freshmen, they are better able to incorporate a "freshman orientation" into the viewpoint from which they evaluate student writing, and to play a role in the development of writing that is more Socratic than didactic. Consulting with tutors can also help instructors to shift their vision into the near-to-far-and-back-again perspective with which tutors are encouraged to work: of course to help improve the piece of writing on hand, but more than that to help the individual on hand become a better writer.